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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Rainer Hampp Verlag

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Gustavsén, B. (2006). Learning Organisation and the Process of Regionalisation. *International Journal of Action Research*, 2(3), 319-342. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-414197>

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# Learning Organisation and the Process of Regionalisation

Bjørn Gustavsen

Concepts like Taylorism, lean production and learning organisation draw attention to the point that work organisation can appear in different forms and it is generally recognised that different conditions tend to produce different forms. Still, there is a tendency to underplay how different these generative conditions are. In this article the issue of learning organisation is placed in focus, drawing upon experiences from Scandinavian workplace development programmes. These experiences indicate that learning organisation is not a question of job design but of a democratic social order characterised by open communication and mutual trust between all concerned. These characteristics are best made real in social environments characterised by pluralism combined with possibilities for interaction and the notion of “region” has come to the forefront in work organisation development.

**Key words:** Work organisation, learning organisation, learning region, action research, workplace development programme

## Introduction

One of the issues that came on the agenda in the period of reconstruction after World War II was work organisation. The reasons were several, ranging from the pressure for productivity to a need to work out more participative and democratic forms of organisation on the level of society. The outcomes

of this focus covered a broad range of initiatives, from bipartite works councils to employee representation on company boards. One type of initiative to appear in this period was research-based field experiments with alternative forms of work organisation. With roots in the pre-war Hawthorne project (Roethlisberger/Dickson 1939) and in the notion of field experiment as developed by Kurt Lewin and colleagues in the 1940s (Lewin 1946), the first major set of experiments appeared in Norway in the 1960s (Emery/Thorsrud 1976). The experiments triggered off a complex set of developments, in Norway and elsewhere. Various efforts to promote new forms of work organisation saw daylight in different countries, sometimes expressing the idea of field experiment, sometimes other ideas. While concerted efforts to change patterns of work organisation became one-time waves in some countries, other countries saw a sequence of efforts that came to span long periods of time. Although the Scandinavian countries are not alone in initiatives to promote new forms of work organization, Scandinavia is the area where most initiatives have appeared and over the longest period of time. From the position of today, it is possible to look back on four decades of concerted efforts from the point of view of questions like what is learnt about work organisation from efforts at *changing* work organisation?

Much of the efforts of the early experiments were directed at replacing Taylorism with forms that could grant the workers a reasonable degree of autonomy in their work roles. One main argument behind the introduction of autonomous forms of work organisation was that these forms could promote learning and flexibility and ensure a higher degree of productivity than the specialisation and simplification inherent in Taylorism. In the discussion below, the notion of learning organisation will be the point of departure and focus will be on initiatives which have implied the promotion of learning oriented forms of organisation, although they often have other aims as well.

The type of initiative to be discussed is “programmes”. A programme is, in this context, taken to mean explicitly organised efforts aiming at intervening in workplace processes, based on co-operation between employers, unions and third parties like consultants, researchers and public actors. Such a definition can, in itself, be in demand of further elaboration but since this article

will deal with a specific set of such programmes a further elaboration is not called for in this context.

### **Programmes**

The historical beginning in field experiments is already mentioned. In the same period case studies of what some organisations had done on their own were also a major approach, both can be lumped together under the heading of *demonstration programmes*. The basic idea was that if the right form is invented or identified, and then described and discussed in research terms, other actors will take notice and apply the same form. To not do so would be to avoid living up to the ideals of the enlightenment, something that is not only functionally criticisable, but even anti-democratic. This notwithstanding, the ability of “star cases” to convince broad groups of other actors was never very high.

On this background various efforts to more specifically promote the diffusion of learning oriented forms of work organisation were introduced in the form of information and training schemes and other initiatives which can be brought together under the heading of *diffusion programmes*.

While experiments followed by diffusion initially ruled the ground, the recognition that there was a need for more interactive approaches emerged stepwise to, by the early 1980s, be broadly recognised. Organisations that wanted to develop new forms could not be expected to do this on their own, relying on “models” of what others had done, maybe supported by a training scheme. There was a need for “more” and this more was thought to have to do with the ability to *create* change. To help meet this need there appeared initiatives that can be called *generative programmes* since their chief aim was to improve on the ability and capacity of each organisation to make the transition into learning oriented forms.

In Sweden as well as in Norway, the labour market parties made new agreements to emphasise their commitment to helping their members work better and more efficiently with work organisation (Gustavsen 1985). In Norway the initiative mainly consisted of some economic and professional support to co-operation between workers and management on enterprise

level, the most highly profiled measure being what eventually came to be called dialogue conferences (Gustavsen/Engelstad 1986). To some extent the professional support was given by research, largely in the form of advice, but in some cases in the form of projects that can be called action research projects (Pålshaugen 1998). In Sweden, The Work Environment Fund was put in between the labour market parties centrally on the one hand and efforts on enterprise level on the other. The Work Environment Fund launched a series of programmes where the main purpose was to explore co-operation and joint development, but under different headings like “technology”, “work environment”, “leadership”, “participation”, “competence” and so on (Oscarsson 1997). Underlying the sequence of programmes was the notion that the introduction of new forms of work organisation implies to unravel a series of complex issues associated with topics like those mentioned above. To help the user organisations unravel the complexities there was a need for expert resources – in particular consultants – that was filled with the help of the economic resources of the Work Environment Fund. Research was also applied but in most programmes as rapporteurs and evaluators. There were some exceptions in the sense that in practically all programmes there emerged some projects where research was used as an on-line development resource. One programme – the second in the sequence called “Leadership, organisation and co-operation” – was designed fully as an action research programme (Gustavsen 1992; Naschold 1993). This programme was to some extent developed along the same line as the one applied in the Norwegian efforts to use research in support of the local activities initiated by the labour market parties.

The prime outcome of the generative efforts of the 1980s was to increase the number of organisations that made efforts at introducing learning oriented forms of organisation. With about 450 organisations using the Norwegian agreement and several hundreds of organisations using the Swedish programmes, a transition was made from “few” to “many”. Still, the efforts were far from covering national labour markets as wholes. Furthermore, it is also quite clear that the number of organisations that actually developed deep going and lasting changes was far smaller than the number that actually made an effort. One estimate was that out of the approximately 450 enterprises that

used the Norwegian agreement, perhaps 30 or so could show substantial development effects in the short and middle run (Gustavsen 1993). In the only Swedish programme that was thoroughly evaluated – the LOM programme (Naschold 1993) – it turned out that about 140 organisations had made an effort to co-operate with the programme, out of which about 70 had actually developed a project. Of these, about 60 led to improvements in worker participation within the time frame of the programme, but only 7 used the new co-operation to make substantial further advances in areas of organisation and use of technology. It is little reason to assume that the profile for other programmes was radically different. A movement towards scope could be seen but the challenge of how to give this movement a more substantial impact remained.

This was one of the recognitions which gave rise to the efforts that came to characterise the 1990s: the national campaigns.

This form first appeared in Sweden with the Work Life Fund. This fund had a special background in the sense that the money came from a special tax that had been levied on all enterprises in the latter 1980s to counteract a strong inflationary drive in the economy. When this drive started to subside, around 1990, it was decided to plough the money back again but to do it through a fund to which organisations could apply for support to improvements in work and work environment. The Fund was equipped with 10 bill SEK (somewhat in excess of 1 bill Euros) and was eventually able to support about 25 000 projects that covered about half of the total Swedish labour market.

The other form of campaign appeared in Denmark, with two efforts: One to counteract repetitive work (Hasle/Møller 2001), another to support work as a source of human development (Hvid/Møller 2001). Although both efforts were national in the sense that they aimed at creating change of significance to working life as a whole, the economic backing mounted to some hundred millions, a far smaller amount than what was distributed by the Work Life Fund in Sweden. However, these efforts relied less on substantial economic support and more on the ability of information, symbols, meeting places and band-wagon effects to create the changes.

Were the goals achieved? In an evaluation done of the Work Life Fund it appeared that on each of the goal dimensions of the programme, about half of the users reported improvements, i.e. 55 % on return to work from people on long term leave of absence, or 45% on reduction of errors in production. Practically all users reported improvement on at least one of the dimensions (Gustavsen et al. 1996). It is always possible to discuss to what extent the results could have been better but that there was a short run programme impact is beyond doubt. The Danish initiative to counteract repetitive work had as its initial aim to reduce the number of workplaces with this characteristic with 150 000 over a period of less than 10 years. This goal was not reached, but it is an estimate that about half of this number of workplaces were in fact changed. Again, there are no absolute standards against which to hold up such results but it is fully possible to argue that this result is quite impressive for a society level investment of a few hundred million crowns.

The long term impact cannot be assessed unless the evaluation continues for a number of years and no such continued evaluation was done of the national campaigns. After the turn of the last century there has been no further effort at creating national campaigns. What have so far appeared in the new millenium, are efforts to improve on the utilisation of research in workplace development processes. The major examples are found in Norway and Finland.

The roots go back to the period of the generative programmes and the use of research as a support actor in the efforts of the labour market parties in Norway. The scope for action research projects in a narrow sense was limited but research worked out a kind of role where ongoing processes in the enterprises were used as a point of departure, and the efforts of research were directed at refining and speeding up these processes so that they could encompass notions like learning organisation and achieve depth in their impacts. This kind of effort can be called *evolutionary* since it is based on using “what is already going on” and achieving its goals through the refining and acceleration of these processes. The research inputs were much focussed on process development, but research also acted as provider of impulses as content was concerned. The possibility of further development in this area occurred in the middle 1990s when the labour market parties, the Research Council of

Norway and Innovation Norway agreed to launch the “Enterprise Development 2000” programme. More money could be made available for research inputs and it became possible to expand the research-based tasks to give research a more active role. Among the tasks in which research became more and more strongly involved during the 1990s was actually the building of networks between enterprises, as enterprises more and more started to work together even within the field of organisation development (presentations of the “Enterprise Development 2000” programme can be found in Gustavsen et al. 2001 and Levin 2002).

In 2001 this programme was replaced by “Value Creation 2010”. While continuing the processes generated by the previous programme, this programme came to imply a growth in the focus on clusters, networks and other forms of co-operation. From this platform a further step has been taken: towards “regions” or “territories” where several clusters may exist along with each other and where there emerges a need for co-ordination and governance on a level beyond clusters and networks. From the beginning of 2007 “Value Creation 2010” will be replaced by “Measures for regional innovation”; a broader frame programme based on using several ongoing programmes as incoming resources, but also adding several measures. In addition to continuing processes on network and cluster level, and on strengthening the work with regional co-ordination and governance, some of the main tasks of the new frame programme are directed at the research establishment itself, in particular at increasing the involvement of research in development and innovation processes on a regional level.

In the 1990s, Finland saw the emergence of a workplace development programme with resources well beyond the Norwegian one. Being linked to the Finnish national innovation policy, which was launched after the collapse of the Soviet trade around 1990, the programme made it possible to further strengthen expert inputs from consultants and researchers (Arnkil et al. 2003). The programme manager uses the concept *configurational* to describe the chief characteristic of this programme (Alasoini 2006). It is a continuation of the idea of evolutionary programme since the efforts even in the Finnish programme take what is already going on in the enterprises as their point of departure, but the measures that can be put in to achieve change in direc-



tion, refinement and acceleration are stronger. Still, when processes that are initially of a local nature are to form the points of departure, the measures cannot be used in a uniform way but have to be put together to form packages suitable to each specific context. Also in Finland there is a tendency towards this context to a growing extent being clusters or networks rather than single organisations. While the Norwegian development must be seen in the light of a more general political drive towards regionalisation, there is no comparable process of regionalisation in Finland. Still, the notion of “region” or “territory” plays a growing role here as well.

Sweden has followed a different track. One outcome of the complexity unravelling programmes of the Work Environment Fund was to contribute to a call for a stronger integration between research directed at different topics, and between research on the one hand and development (and education) on the other. On this background the Work Environment Fund was, in the middle 1990s, merged with the Work Environment Institute (health and safety) and the Institute for Work Life Research (work organisation), to form the National Institute for Working Life. In the Autumn of 2006 the Swedish government declared the closing down of this institute. Whatever the more specific motives for this decision, and however questionable the way in which it is done, the decision also reflects the point that the aim of achieving integration across disciplines as well as in relation to the development processes in working life is not easily reached from the position of a central actor. In the meantime, activity not unlike what has emerged within the context of the Finnish and Norwegian programmes has emerged also in Sweden, but lacking a programme context they generally have the form of individual projects involving co-operation between R&D institutions and enterprises, often on a regional basis. These projects are generally seen under the heading of “the third task”, or “the third mission”; a concept that occurs in the Swedish legislation on the universities (Brulin 2003).

The Danish pattern is much like the Swedish in the sense that there is no overall programme framework but a substantial number of initiatives based on local co-operation. These initiatives are strengthened by two factors: The agreement system in Denmark is less centralised than in, for instance, Norway and leaves more to the local partners, including how to develop co-

operation. While this kind of pattern may sometimes make new general initiatives difficult it may be an advantage if there is a general focus on a theme, for instance work organisation. It may be that the campaigns of the 1990s have created such a focus and that the greater degree of local responsibility constitutes an advantage. A further point is that Denmark, due to some extent to geographical conditions, is the Scandinavian country that exhibits most of the characteristics associated with the notion of "industrial district". An industrial district is an agglomeration of enterprises within a limited geographical area with a corresponding potential for co-operation.

### **Learning from the programmes**

What can be learnt from these efforts?

First, and quite obviously, there is no universally best way to the practical development of learning organisation. At best, one way may be better than other ways in specific historical situations. Since decisions about strategy have to be made "within" situations rather than after they have become history, even if "one best way" existed it would, as appears from numerous studies of the limits to rationality, in actual practice be extremely difficult to find. Even though each separate effort must generally be seen within a context, as specific responses to specific situations, there are some overall trends to be seen:

There is a clear change in the belief in "star cases", "leading cases" and similar to create broad development. Even if such cases are thought to be able to play a role, there is a broad recognition of the point that so much more is needed that even the best of cases tends to recede into the background. This "more" generally has to do with scope, magnitude, or mass: how to make learning organisation become a widely applied idea. Even when what to strive for has been identified, to make people actually strive for it is a different matter.

This recognition provides a background for reflections on the role of research and science. Of the various approaches that can be applied to the issue of organisation, experiments in combination with a research based illumination and documentation of their nature and outcomes is the strongest scien-

tific method available, even if experiments in the social field cannot be expected to follow the same logics as naturalist experiments. If a reasonable number of scientifically documented experiments demonstrate a point – for instance the superiority of learning organisation from a productivity perspective – it goes against the spirit of the enlightenment for other enterprises not to follow suit. This notwithstanding, this is just what happened and what the initiatives indicated above have been about. As can be seen from the short overview, they are based on a range of different approaches, spanning from economic stimulants via campaign-like symbolism and bandwagon effects, to infrastructure building and further on to the use of research-based measures in combinations designed to fit the characteristics of specific configurations of local conditions. Common to all is that they do not rely purely – not even mainly – on the enlightenment potential of model cases in combination with scientific texts. In fact, what emerged quite early was that the model cases were in a sense more local than general. In Ejnatten's major effort at mapping out the history of the socio-technical school in organisation theory (Ejnatten 1993), one point to emerge is that the number of experiments or experiment-like efforts with alternative forms of work organisation is very large at the same time as it is impossible to estimate with any degree of exactness neither the number nor their more specific content and outcomes. For the reader of Ejnattens study they appear as a diffuse mass of events where each event disappears into its own background. One may, of course, discuss to what extent a presentation like the one done by Ejnatten could have been done better or clearer, but it remains that there is no single study that deals with a number of experiments at the same time as it is able to set them apart from their environments. The problems with making experiments standing out from their contexts was one of the reasons for a new shift in perspective: from what is to be learnt to who is to learn.

### **From what can be learnt to who is to learn**

The issue of how to learn from cases did in fact appear together with the first generation of field experiments. When Emery and Thorsrud designed the first field experiments in the 1960s, they did not expect diffusion to take place

simply as a consequence of successful experiments in combination with scientific reporting. They brought in a number of further considerations, in particular the need for network type relationships between the actors of the field sites and the actors that were to learn from them (Emery/Thorsrud 1976). The first field sites were selected with a strong emphasis on this aspect: they were to be well recognised within the national industrial environment and their chief actors were to have strong links to other actors. Underlying this was the recognition that diffusion is not simply a question of knowledge transmission. The knowledge has a social environment and this environment needs to fulfil certain requirements. Central in this context is *trust*: The organisations where the experiments occurred had to have a reputation for wisdom and good judgment and for sending information that was reliable and for not trying to gloss over difficulties and setbacks. Only then would those who received the information dare to act on the basis of the information.

The need to surround the development of learning organisation with social structures and processes that can make experience credible and actionable has resurfaced in many different contexts. In a job design workshop organised by the social partners in Norway in the 1970s, to let a number of enterprises work together proved to be an efficient approach to diffusion between the participating enterprises (Engelstad/Ødegaard 1979). When the Swedish Work Environment Fund launched its sequence of programmes in the 1980s, one idea was to make each programme form a network of organisations that could form some kind of learning community. When the social partners in Norway revised the agreement on development – in 1990 – they introduced branch- or industry programmes in an effort to overcome the lack of in-depth effects in the participating organisations. The jump from single enterprises to industries or branches turned out to be too big and these programmes became little more than an episode. They did, however, point at the importance of co-operation between organisations in learning from cases and in this way paved the ground for further developments. The first major example of this emerged in the early 1990s when Nordvest-Forum gained broad recognition. Being initiated by the enterprises concerned, Nordvest-Forum is a co-operation between enterprises located on the northern part of the West Coast of Norway. Initially founded to promote management development and meet a critical

shortage of competent managers in the region, the network stepwise came to take up such issues as organisation development in co-operation between member enterprises (Hanssen-Bauer 2001). Today consisting of about 50 owner enterprises and a further 100 users, covering altogether about 10 000 workplaces, this is a relatively large network. Another example is the Sunnhordland Industry Network somewhat further south on the same coast, encompassing about 20 enterprises with about 5 000 employees (Claussen 2003). To some extent inspired by this network, about 10 similar initiatives have emerged in the same area, most of them resulting in active co-operation between groups of enterprises (Claussen 2003). Other examples could be mentioned; the tendency towards the formation of networks is a fairly broad one. When the Swedish Work Life Fund was launched it was equipped with 24 regional offices that were to handle applications and project development. While this was a necessity to handle the distribution of 10 bill crowns over a few years, it also had consequences for the structure of the learning processes to emerge from the projects. Most of the specific measures that were taken to diffuse experience and knowledge were organised on a regional level and reinforced the notion of some kind of network or similar type of relationship as being of critical importance to the achievement of scope in the development of learning oriented forms of organisation. When the Work Life Fund reached the end of its five year period, much of the structures collapsed but the idea of networking was carried on to reappear in the European programmes that came to Sweden with the Swedish membership in the European Union. Under the Objective 4 framework more than 2000 networks applied for support (Svensson et al. 2003). Again, many were dissolved and many never even came to enter a phase of operations but the idea gained in strength. When the "Enterprise Development 2000" programme entered the scene in Norway in the middle 1990s, it was with support to network development as one of its main targets, a perspective that was taken over and strengthened when the programme was replaced by "Value Creation 2010". The Finnish programme had more of an orientation towards individual organisations but has stepwise been turned more towards networks until it today includes 10 network projects encompassing around 200 organisations. Although the development towards networks is not in itself a process that

stands out clearly against a background there are some aspects that appear as well grounded:

First, there is a shift in terms of the basic question itself; from what can be learnt to who is to learn. The formation of networks and similar configurations implies to identify a circle of actors who are in a privileged position as learning from workplace development is concerned. The network draws a boundary between “insiders” and “outsiders”.

What does it mean to be an insider? The insider perspective has to do with communication and trust. Practically all the networks have a geographical basis and involve people who can relate and communicate without having to cross large communicative gaps, be it in terms of distances or language. They can, furthermore, develop mutual trust since they are sufficiently close to each other to be able to test each other in action terms. The knowledge and other impulses that move around in the networks are reliable since they emanate from sources who will break relationships of trust if they circulate misleading information.

Furthermore, it is known from the cases that have been studied that learning from cases is a process that needs to be adapted to the requirements of the one who is to learn. Enterprise actors who want to gain new impulses within the field of work organisation are characterised by themselves being involved in the development of work organisation. The need for learning emerges out of an action situation and the characteristics of this situation shape the learning needs. One major consequence is the need for a process perspective. The need for learning is something that unfolds over time, as different challenges appear. From this perspective, to learn from a case demands continuous access to the case. This is a chief reason why long distance learning from cases is at best difficult.

There is, however, a further implication. Few enterprises can offer actors from other enterprises continuous access to their own experience without getting anything in return. Even “the source of learning” has to learn. Over time, this has led the network formations to become more and more balanced, even in terms of who is learning from whom. As early as in the job design seminar in the 1970s it was demonstrated that scope was most efficiently reached between enterprises in horizontal collaboration rather than between enterprises

in a leader-follower configuration. In a horizontal configuration the enterprises are, in principle, on an equal footing, in terms of what they have achieved as well as in terms of what they need to learn. Learning is mutual, based on exchange. This means that all enterprises must have not only a need to learn but also something to offer.

When the enterprises are taking points from each other in a pattern of continuous collaboration there are no star cases, in fact, there are no cases of a traditional kind characterised by one organisation doing so many smart things simultaneously that it goes to some kind of frontline in organisation development. Rather, each organisation may have done something worth considering and other things not worth considering. Actually, there are no fixed standards for what is worth considering. Learning does not only occur from “successful acts”, the situation is more complex. It is well known that one may also learn from failures; even more important is that most learning starts from differences where “success” or “failure” is only one aspect of what is considered. For, say, an enterprise working on the introduction of team work it can be of major interest to get access to similar efforts in other enterprises irrespective of their outcomes in terms of success or failure relative to some productivity- or innovation goal.

When organisations pick elements from each other, what each organisation does is not based on “models” but on what Latour (1998) calls hybrids. A hybrid is a collection of elements put together in a certain pattern where the elements come from a number of different sources, some external, some internal.

Beyond the tendency to place more and more emphasis on scope, there is a tendency in this development that can be characterised as pointing towards constructivism (Gergen/Gergen in print). In this context, the notion of constructivism indicates that the prime role of research is to provide building material in processes where something is made in the real world. This use differs from the more traditional, where constructivism is often used to indicate that reality is understood through the grid of a pre-given conceptual scheme. In fact, when research becomes engaged in the building of structures in reality, it is soon discovered that reality never lets itself be fully shaped by pre-given understandings. It always strikes back in ways that call for new understand-

ings, new conceptual schemes. What holds the efforts together are not theories but the demands of the practical process. Taken separately, these points are not particularly new or radical; some have been circulating for about 50 years. Still, it is commonly accepted that the development towards learning oriented forms of work organisation is at best slow, maybe even stagnant. In what direction can they be further developed?

### **Work organisation and trust**

Lorenz and Valeyre (2005) define the difference between lean production and learning organisation largely in terms of autonomy. While in lean production each member of the organisation is strongly controlled by methods, plans and steering mechanisms, as well as by external constraints on work rate, learning organisation is characterised by more autonomy within these areas, that is: freedom for the employee to define what to do, when and how, individually or as part of a group with autonomy on group level. For management to accept employee autonomy, management must trust the employees to not only be able to handle whatever situations may appear, but also strongly motivated to perform well. The employees on their side must be willing to develop the requisite competence and they must be willing to accept responsibility. This calls for investments in learning and for people to be willing to make these investments, they must be able to trust the willingness and ability of management to maintain patterns of organisation where these investments maintain their relevance. The employees must, in other words, trust management not to reverse employee autonomy on arbitrary grounds.

A work situation characterised by autonomy and mutual trust can be seen from two different perspectives: One perspective is to see it as a situation characterised by trust in combination with the application of certain criteria for job design; this was how the relationship was seen in the early field experiments. The other perspective is to abandon the difference between trust and job design and see the situation as expressing a *democratic order*. A core characteristic of the relationship between the actors of a democratic order is that they grant each other a certain degree of freedom in deciding how to relate to each specific situation and how to pursue one's interests in a dialogue



with the other actors. Under what conditions can a democratic order be expected to emerge and survive?

### **The unit of learning**

When the issue of “industrial democracy” entered the scene, focus was on the individual organisation. Many of the contributors to the arguments for industrial democracy saw the individual enterprise as a kind of micro society, subject to the need for a democratic constitution superimposed by society to lay the foundation for an internal democratic social order. One problem with this position is that no national government has so far been willing to grant the individual enterprise the status of an autonomous democratic unit. In all known forms of society of any economic significance, managerial hierarchies with the right to ultimately decide what kind of order is to exist within the organisation have been maintained. Modifications have been introduced in a number of countries, such as demands for negotiations with the unions before certain decisions are carried through, bipartite works councils to deal with certain issues, or employee representation on company boards. None of these measures have represented an ultimate removal of the basic elements of managerial control. This was the background against which Emery and Thorsrud (1976) launched their argument for industrial democracy as a specific order of work organisation based on worker autonomy. Only by including work organisation in the democratisation process would it be possible to ensure the support of management since work organisation based on autonomy would ensure a higher level of productivity and innovation compared to alternative forms.

While there is little doubt that history has proven this argument essentially right, the same history has demonstrated its vulnerability to competing views on productivity and innovation. Of particular importance in this context is the quality movement, later converted to the lean production movement. There is little doubt that this movement achieved impressive results in, for instance, the automobile industry, at the same time as American observers interpreted this movement in terms of patterns of work organisation that made it possible to maintain full managerial control of all aspects of work without renouncing

on learning among the workers (Womack et al 1990). It is only recently that the perspective has again started to shift. Vernon (2006) points out that the success of lean production has to be explained more in terms of the social order of specific societies – i.e. Japan – than in terms of autonomy-based forms of work organisation. While the tendency to score higher than the averages on autonomy organisation in European surveys has generally been interpreted as Scandinavian eccentricity, there is now a tendency to link these scores to the point that these countries in fact tend to score high on most comparative studies of employment, innovation and quality of life (Lorenz and Valeyre 2005; Asheim 2006). This coincides with a more general recognition of the point that there are limits to the learning that can be expected from people in highly controlled work roles. Although the renaissance for learning organisation may still be modest, it is not non-existent and warrants a new look at how such patterns are brought about.

### **Learning and pluralism: towards the learning region**

Common to such configurations as clusters and networks is that they are not under the control of one single hierarchy. When several enterprises are involved, it means that a number of managerial hierarchies are involved and that they need to act in concert to be able to change the social order. A network is, in other words, a social context that provides a stronger guarantee against the one-sided removal of a pattern of learning organisation and its replacement with non-learning forms. It is, consequently, easier for the individual employee to make the necessary personal investments in learning and the taking of responsibility as well as in co-operation with others.

There are fluid boundaries between networks and related forms of social organisation. In Gustavsen et al. (in print) there is a study of a development that had its starting point in one of the field experiments of the 1960s. This experiment occurred in a process plant belonging to Norsk Hydro located in the Grenland area, approximately 200 kilometers south of Oslo. The experiment (described in Emery/Thorsrud 1976) was among the most successful of the experimental period, in its replacement of a hierarchical organisation based on dividing lines between supervisors and workers, and between proc-

ess workers, control room workers and maintenance workers internally, with a group pattern based on shift groups where each took responsibility for all the functions. There was little direct diffusion from this experiment over the next two decades. In the 1990s, however, the global productivity pressure triggered off a new wave of organisational change. The original experimental plant was gone by this time, but this plant had been one of a cluster of process plants located in the same area. Other plants picked up the idea of organisation development based on intensified co-operation between management and workers. Stepwise a process has unfolded, beginning with changes in internal organisation within each plant, but continuing with a growing number of plant-crossing initiatives, such as joint maintenance services, and continuing with pulling in local suppliers. Eventually the co-operation has moved beyond this to include the regional representatives of the labour market parties, regional political-administrative actors and more. Several other examples can be found of network formations that successively take on some of the aspects of regional development (see for instance Claussen 2003; Johnstad 2006).

The enterprise networks aim at dealing with several questions: productivity and innovation are generally at the core. What set these networks on a course where they have come to pioneer learning oriented forms of organisation was not the need to be productive or innovative in itself but the decision to strive for these goals in co-operation with the employees. This implied that learning had to find a broad base within each enterprise. It is possible that such a basis could have been created through some kind of controlled learning process, but when the generative process itself builds on co-operation with organised employees, where not only union representatives are invited to join the process but the employees in general as well, the development gains a momentum towards learning based on autonomy. In such a process the employees have to be given status as subjects. The examples demonstrate, on the other hand, that learning organisation based on autonomy is not something that is achieved overnight. All the networks participating in the Value Creation 2010 programme have gone through a number of phases where the development and sustenance of employee autonomy has been dependent upon the ability to handle problems of increasing complexity, of which a

growing number cross enterprise boundaries. A process that stretches out over time is, however, necessary for trust to be developed; the parties need repeated situations of joint action before the level of trust is sufficiently high to fully correspond to the demands of a learning organisation.

When a development becomes “regional” the degree of pluralism increases to include new categories of actors, such as representatives of regional development agencies and authorities. The resemblance to a pluralist democratic order increases. The actor configuration becomes increasingly more differentiated, the number of arenas accessible to each actor grows, channels of influence multiply at the same time as a sense of regional belongingness and loyalty towards other actors in the same region emerges. If we see learning organisation as a question of a democratic order rather than a question of job design, this kind of environment appears as most conducive to the promotion of learning organisation.

It is reasonable to see the relatively high scores on learning organisation shown by the Scandinavian countries in the light of the existence of a number of environments or communities of this kind. On the other hand: these communities do not appear according to one single blueprint and often exist in terms of fragments rather than in terms of strongly organised units with clear-cut boundaries. On the national level, however, the problem is not to explain radical differences between Scandinavia and the rest of Europe, but differences that are much more gradual. The tendency to interpret “Scandinavian exceptionalism” in terms of the macro-political characteristics of these societies (i.e. Lorenz/Valeyre 2005) is not wrong, but it overlooks the point that there must be elements of social organisation that mediate between macro-political conditions and workplace development processes.

So far, the notion of region as an arena for the development of learning organisation is a complex concept. Relatively few cases of actual development are thoroughly researched, and most of the research done on “the learning region” in general does not focus on work organisation. What can be seen, however, from the cases that have been made subject to research, is that although one may talk about regions they are much smaller than the configurations generally associated with this notion. The case mentioned above involves, with its 100 000 inhabitants, one of the largest. In most cases the de-

velopment of learning organisation occurs in clusters of enterprises with up to 5 – 6 000 people directly involved and surrounding communities of 20 – 30 000 people. Even though these units often represent key elements within the larger administrative regions within which they are located and, consequently, play a role in regional politics and development well beyond their actual size, the regions are still far smaller than the phenomena generally called “region” and where the upper limit may be constituted by, say, Nordrhein-Westfalen in Germany with a population close to 20 million. For the notion of “region” to catch issues of work organisation development there is a need to focus on units somewhere in between the typical administrative region on the one hand and the small enterprise network on the other. There is a need either for a multi-level notion of region or for another concept that can cover units that can function as a context for the development of learning organisation. So far, the concept of “learning region” may be the best option since it indicates that not any region falls under the concept but only regions that fulfil certain requirements. Another possibility is “territory”, but this concept may be seen as somewhat too geographical. On the other hand: it may not be a need for a sharply featured concept. The units that seem best able to promote learning organisation may be seen as end points on a scale where most real situations will occur in between; they will have some element of learning region but not all and will show variations in their ability to promote learning organisation. At the moment, the notion of learning region functions first and foremost through its ability to draw attention to the need for a democratic order with the ability to generate trust as the core condition for learning organisation. It is even possible to turn back to some of the historical cases and reinterpret them in the light of this point. The internationally most well known example of systematic efforts to promote learning oriented forms in a large industrial corporation may be the Swedish automobile producer Volvo, a development that occurred during the two decades when Gyllenhammar was chief executive. With its many plants and numerous managerial hierarchies and expert groups, its co-operation with unions and employees and its broad use of research and consultants, Volvo fulfilled many of the characteristics of a learning region. In line with the single company, however, the efforts to spearhead this kind of development came to an

end with the retirement of Gyllenhammar. In most cases management driven change lasts for much shorter periods of time. With placing the learning region in focus the intention is, consequently, not only to introduce a new reference point for organisation development in addition to the individual enterprise – or for that matter units within each enterprise, such as groups or departments – but also to point at the shortcomings of some of the established ones.

The kind of drift towards regionalisation indicated above can be seen as an example of a tendency that has acquired major proportions on the international scene: in some form or other “regionalisation” occurs in major parts of the world today. Against this background it is important to emphasise that this kind of process occurs for many different reasons and that the reasons underlying the above examples are only some of those that are operative within this area. It is also important to emphasise that far from all processes towards regionalisation have anything to do with work organisation. Furthermore, the reasons are not new in the sense that they have been emerging only in recent years. When the movement towards learning oriented forms of work organisation started with field experiments and other cases, a process of “bottom-up” learning was introduced and the challenges posed by such a process are dominating the agenda today as in the period immediately after the first experimental changes. What differs is first and foremost the view on how bottom-up learning can take place. For a long time the idea that single cases could be abstracted from their contexts and provide a basis directly for learning processes involving many organisations was maintained. Since the studies indicating that this did not work too well started to appear as early as the 1970s (i.e. Bolweg 1976), the reason for this maintenance has to be sought in other sources, such as research traditions focussing almost exclusively on the potential of written texts, and the need of political-administrative bodies, in particular on the level of the nation state, to base social action on centralised understandings. What happens today is first and foremost a break with these perspectives to instead build the learning processes bottom-up without shortcuts.

What this implies varies, between countries and even regions. New demands are placed on all the actors involved and how well they are met today

and will be met in the future differs as well. One of the challenges is to handle the notion of learning region as an evolutionary phenomenon, often emerging from a smaller group of actors, growing through network formations and eventually including political-administrative actors. From this platform the growth can continue into formations where several units join each other to form broader regions. Fixed boundaries and given administrative dividing lines will block this kind of development. Learning regions will have to be defined according to the learning process and this has in itself fluid boundaries

The various actors involved will have to consider their roles as well, for instance research. While the need for research to abandon strong boundaries against involvement in practices has been emphasised a number of times in recent years (i.e. Gibbons et al 1994) and the need for research to become a partner in “innovation systems” based on a “triple helix” co-operation with enterprises and the public sector held forth (Etzkowitz/Leydesdorff 2000), there is still the paradox that these needs are argued in abstract form as if they can be fully identified in texts. The point that most practical learning has to take place bottom up and at several stages involve a need to locate research in a specific position relative to the practices it works with, is generally overlooked. The role of research as an insider sharing responsibility for new practices is generally the topic of action research. Action research, however, often tries to set itself apart from other forms of research. If bottom-up learning processes are to emerge on a broad front the need for research input will grow substantially and so will the need for cross-disciplinary inputs. For action research the challenge is no longer to set itself apart but to contribute to the formation of learning regions, which are characterised just by co-operation between all the actors that such a development calls for.

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